How to Design the Best Private School Website

The Hold-Nothing-Back Guide to Staying On Budget, On Schedule, and On Target

BY DAREN WORCESTER

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Website redesigns don't have to be long, arduous, can't-wait-until-it's-over projects. All it takes is planning to avoid the mess, and this guide is packed with everything you need to know to stay a step ahead.

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WHEN TO BEGIN

Do you want to know the secret to creating the best website possible for your school?

It's quite simple, actually: planning.

Most private schools conduct website redesigns every three to six years. Based on this cycle, you probably have a good idea for when your school will begin its next redesign project. By looking ahead in the calendar and preparing a year or two in advance, you'll lay the foundation for a successful project that stays on budget, remains on schedule, and wows constituents.

If the two-year lead-in sounds excessive, consider the school that plans a rebranding process several months before beginning the website project. Sure, the branding company will give you a production schedule that shows the project completion occurring in time for the website design process to begin, but—spoiler alert—that never happens. Truly, it doesn't—no hyperbole.

Admittedly, this is a case of the pot calling the kettle black—website redesign projects are also notorious for extending the end date. Why? Website projects are multifaceted endeavors—containing navigation discussions, SEO, content creation, design, site review, etc.—that are above and beyond the existing job responsibilities of most school personnel. In other words, it's a lot of work and your time is limited.

You may be surprised to hear this from a company that has developed private school websites for two decades and would, of course, love to have your business. The way we see it, if we're not going to share the hard truths with you in the spirit of lending a helping hand, even when it's not what you want to hear, then we're not deserving of your business. Thus, *The Hold-Nothing-Back Guide to Staying On Budget, On Schedule, and On Target!*

Here's another truth: Website redesigns don't have to be long, arduous, can't-wait-until-it's-over projects. All it takes is planning to avoid the mess, and this guide is packed with everything you need to know to stay a step ahead. I'd say get your note pen ready, but as you'll see, we've got you covered there, too.

Let's get Started!

CHAPTER

01

Preparation
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Images make the design—not the other way around—and recycled photos from the existing website and the school's print materials are destined to underwhelm those reviewing the new design.

To committe or not to committee—it's not even a question.

I'll forewarn you: This joke is bad, but that's never stopped me before, so...you know the one about the camel being a racehorse designed by a committee? Yeah, that's also what happens to website designs when too many cooks are in the kitchen. However, we understand you're a school founded on the principles of knowledge sharing and collaboration, and there are many stakeholders from whom you're going to need help to complete the project. You can't NOT have a committee.

So how do you get that committee to the finish line on a Thoroughbred instead of a camel? Get them involved early. And I don't mean just sending them a survey—actually sit down and talk about what they think works with the current website and what doesn't. Hear them out. Take thorough notes on who said what. Then have them compile a list of sites they like (they don't have to be schools) and ones they don't.

This information is extremely valuable for the designer, but hard-truth time: You can't dump it all on the designer to sort out. Inevitably, what some people like, others won't. The designer doesn't know whose opinion matters most and this juggling act can seriously clog the creative process. Gathering feedback is great, but at the end of the day, someone has to have the final say. It's critical that the decision-making hierarchy gets established in advance with your head of school.

At the beginning of a website design project with the Blackbaud K–12 Team, we'll ask you for this information. If you've collected and consolidated it in advance, you've just saved yourself a couple weeks of work during the project. But that's not the best part...

Keep your notes on who said what, because when it comes time to present the design to the committee, you'll be able to articulate how stakeholder feedback influenced the design. If someone had a strong opinion that wasn't incorporated, you can get ahead of it and explain how it didn't fit into the overall design strategy. In other words, you aren't presenting the design and asking for feedback; you're showing how their valuable input created a design that represents the school's mission.

That's how Thoroughbreds win the race.

The Best Money You Can Spend on the Website

To get a website design that wows prospective families, the best money you can spend is on a professional photographer. Nothing stops a website visitor in their tracks and makes an immediate, indelible impression like beautiful imagery.

Video is great too, but video requires more cognitive load to make an impression and can weigh down a page's actual load time, hindering search standings. There's definitely a place for video on school websites, but there's a strong case for avoiding it on the home page.

Designing with images similar to the ones you want is not the same as designing with the final website imagery. Images display differently on various devices, so you'll want to see how your photos work with the design at the beginning of the project—not the end—to avoid change-order expenses and launch delays.

And remember that committee? You're more likely to get a standing ovation when you unveil the new design if it's focused on beautiful pictures they've never seen before. Images make the design—not the other way around—and recycled photos from the existing website and the school's print materials are destined to underwhelm those reviewing the new design. The real kicker is that they may not realize what's not quite right about the design, and they'll look for answers. Long story short—saddle up the camel.

If you have the luxury of planning ahead, spend the year before the website project begins acquiring professional imagery of the school's various programs and the campus in all seasons. Take the best shots and hide them from everyone until the new website design—now you're back on the horse!

Where photos appear on the website makes a difference in the type of image needed. Use these rules of thumb to guide your photographer:

Home Page Feature Photos

To determine the best 5–7 images that will make the final rotation, you'll want a batch of 20–30 great photos to choose from. These images should be shot with the landscape orientation and avoid staged poses or clichéd subject matter—only candid photography captures the true essence of the school. The photos should also showcase a variety of school programs and represent a balance of student age, gender, and ethnicity.

That's a lot to pack into five to seven photos. Here's one more thing: Think about how each image differentiates and embodies the school. Any school can have a soccer image on its home page, but rock climbing or zookeeping makes a statement.

Banner Photos

Great banner photos are the hardest to acquire because the long and narrow image dimensions are tricky to crop. These have to be landscape or panoramic photos, and it's best if the subject matter is campus scenery, artistic imagery (stained glass, building architecture, flowers, etc.), or long-distance shots of students. Keep in mind that the intent of these photos is to serve as a backdrop on the page to encourage people to scroll down.

Page Photos

Photos that appear in text or sidebars help add visual interest to a page. These can be horizontal or portrait in orientation, and while professional quality is nice to have, the emphasis here is quantity. To plan ahead, count on two to three photos per page. For a 100-page website, that's a maximum of 300 images. Getting a parent volunteer who's a photography enthusiast, running around campus with a good point-and-shoot camera, or collecting quality cell phone photos from faculty (and even students) can help build the website stockpile.

Keep in mind that this isn't an exercise to simply gather any 300 images—you need to collect 300 different pictures that represent all programs featured on the site. For example, if you take 30 photos at an event, only one or two of them should be used on the website to maintain the type of image diversity that will make your site stand out page after page.

Search Engine
Optimization (SEO)

At its core, SEO is about people: what we think, what we want to know, and how we view your school. From this perspective, every school needs SEO.

SEO is not what you think it is.

When I first started working in private school website development, many schools still had homegrown websites run by the technology office or the librarian. The schools that were quick to realize the web was becoming their first point of contact with admissions prospects transferred ownership to the marketing team and invested in a professionally developed website. These schools feasted on a significant competitive advantage while their neighbors scrambled to catch up.

SEO, short for search engine optimization, is going through the same maturation process at private schools. In the most competitive markets, the gold rush period is over, and the schools that haven't invested in SEO are losing out on prospects. Well-established schools that fill their admissions pipeline based on reputation alone may think that SEO is unnecessary, but it's better to have a well-optimized site and not need it from an admissions perspective than to have a sudden, unexpected public relations issue and not be prepared. Unfortunately, no school is immune from the type of negative publicity that can dominate search results.

SEO is about more than trying to entice a complex algorithm to return your school's website in various search queries. As a society, we have become programmed to turn to Google® and other search applications to answer our questions. The advent of voice search and digital assistants only strengthens this resolve.

At its core, SEO is about people: what we think, what we want to know, and how we view your school. From this perspective, every school needs SEO, whether it's to attract admissions prospects, ensure that digital assistants provide the correct answer when someone asks about the school's tuition, or build the school's brand identity.

Optimizing the School's Website

SEO has a misguided reputation: People tend to assume that it's incredibly complicated and requires a high degree of technical know-how. While website coding does influence SEO, the the vast majority of SEO best practices are things that school communications personnel can easily tackle.

SEO is influenced by a variety of on-site factors: content, technical makeup, website structure, and user behavior. It is also affected by off-site factors: inbound links, local SEO, social media, and brand recognition. The best SEO strategies strike a balance amongst all factors, but since this is an eBook about creating great school websites, we're going to focus on page optimization here.
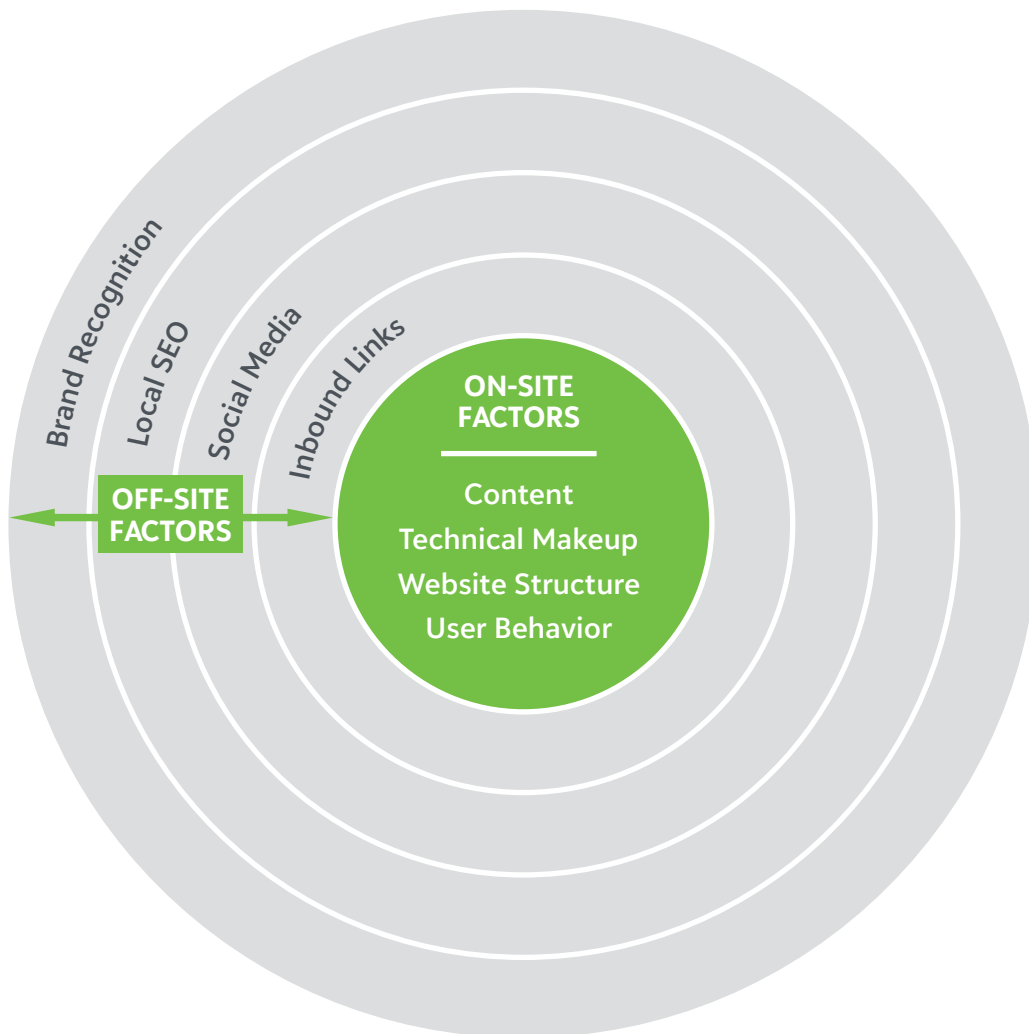
Let's start by addressing the elephant in the search results. In the introduction to this section, we discussed how SEO is about people and the way they view your school. However, private school marketing is typically filled with terminology that is inherently different from how the general public perceives the school.

It starts with the term "private school." Most schools use "independent school" because it doesn't imply being an exclusive institution. However, the general public views schools as being either public or private. They also search for "elementary schools" instead of "lower schools" and "high schools" instead of "upper schools." This difference is illustrated by the following Google monthly search volume data for school keywords (the terms people enter into search queries):[1]

SCHOOL KEYWORD	MONTHLY VOLUME	VS.	PUBLIC KEYWORD	MONTHLY VOLUME
ALL LOCATIONS				
Independent Schools	12,100	<	Private Schools	74,000
Lower Schools	320	<	Elementary Schools	301,000
Upper Schools	140	<	High Schools	49,500
REGIONAL SEARCHES				
Boston Independent Schools	110	<	Boston Private Schools	1,600
Boston Lower Schools	Low Volume*	<	Boston Elementary Schools	560
Boston Upper Schools	Low Volume	<	Boston High Schools	5,400

* Low Volume represents an average of less than 10 searches per month; in these cases, Google doesn't report search data

Before search engines can take into consideration factors like inbound links and user behavior, the prerequisite is whether the search keywords match terminology on your school's website.

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If you aren't using "private school" in content throughout the site, then your school is not going to display in these search results.

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The search volume listed above is the tip of the iceberg for core keywords like "private school," "elementary school," and "high school." There are also thousands of long-tail keyword searches, such as "elementary school STEM program" and "private high school dance program." While there's significantly less volume around the individual long-tail queries, these are winnable searches that better represent admissions prospects than a generalized "private school" search.

If your school is going to optimize for the term "private school," this keyword needs to be included on the dance page to rank for searches like "private high school dance program." You should also have a page where private school is the main topic—for example, "Why Choose a Private School?"—to optimize for localized "private school" searches.

Once you've determined the keywords to use on the site and have mapped them to specific pages, work them into:

- The page's URL

- The title of the page

- Subheads

- The first or second sentence and throughout the text

- Image captions and alt tags

- Text links

Blackbaud Academy **Admissions** | A *Private Day School* in *Bedford, NH* —— *Title Tag*

http://www.blackbaudacademy.org/**admissions** —— *URL*

Welcome to **Admissions** —— *H1 Tag*

Admissions

private day school

grades 9–12

Bedford, NH

Admissions

Applying

tuition

financial aid

admissions

File Name:
blackbaud-academy-campus.jpg

Alt Tag:
Blackbaud Academy Campus

Caption:
Students enjoy a beautiful fall day on campus. Alumni say it's one of the many things about Blackbaud Academy they miss the most!

How to **Apply** to *Private School*

apply

Named *Best School* in *New Hampshire*

New Hampshire

Touring the *High School* —— *H2 Tag* Campus

high school

Meta description: Learn about the **admissions** process to Blackbaud Academy's *college prep* program for *grades 9–12. Tuition* and *financial aid* info included.

Key —
Primary Keyword
Secondary Keywords
Link Anchor Text

In addition to content, also feature keywords in the page's meta information. Most website content management systems include SEO fields in page settings for the following:

- **Page title tag**—think of this as a beefed-up version of the actual page title that displays in search results and the user's browser tab. Keywords in the title tag can influence a page's search standings.

- **Meta description**—this is the call-to-action text displayed under the page title tag in search results. Keywords in the meta description don't have a direct impact on search standings, but they do help entice clicks, which can improve placement over time.
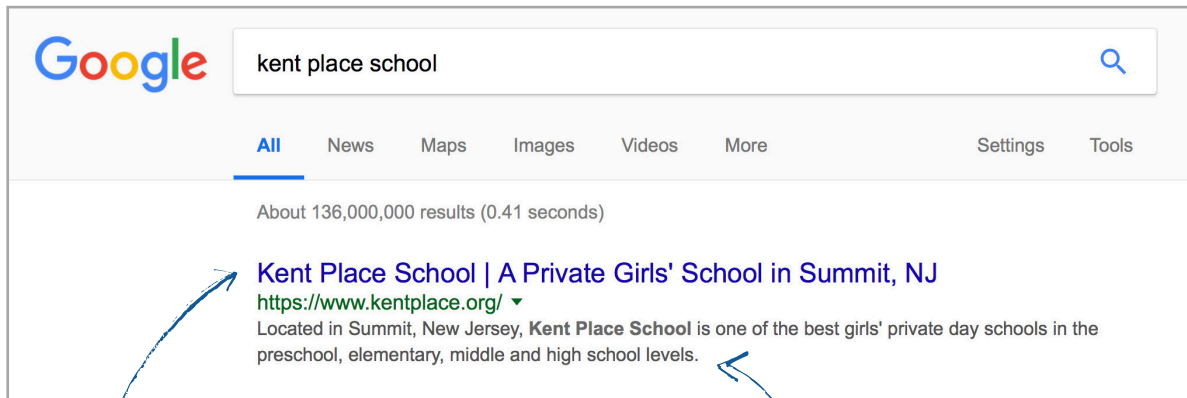
Getting Started with SEO

An excellent first step to SEO work is to conduct an old-fashioned brainstorming session where you list out all the possible keywords to describe your school and its programs. You can then use the free Google Keyword Planner tool in Google Ads™ to understand search volume for each term, as well as KWFinder to discover keywords closely related to the ones you've already listed.

It's also helpful to know where your school ranks in search results for each term. This knowledge will allow you to pick the right keywords for your school by targeting terms that are attainable. Paid tools, such as AuthorityLabs® or Moz®, are the way to go here because they will store your keywords and show improvement over time.

These also provide search volume data.

When you're ready to write title tags and meta descriptions, Portent's® free SERP Preview Tool is great because it shows where Google's character-limit cutoffs appear. The Grammarly® browser plug-in also works within this tool, making it safe to write title tags and meta descriptions there and then copy them directly to the website.

Hard truth: SEO work takes time, and it's not a set-it-and-forget-it activity. Continuous cultivation will yield the best results. If you don't have the time to dig in or would like professional assistance, Blackbaud K–12's SEO experts can conduct keyword research and write title tags and meta descriptions for you. We also offer SEO training so you can be proficient going forward. If you're not sure where to begin, our comprehensive SEO audit will show the areas of your site in need of improvement and offer a plan of attack.

Most of the SEO work that we do coincides with redesign projects because that's when everyone is thinking about improving the website, but it's better to tackle SEO in advance. Doing so will give you insight into needed content and navigation updates, as well as allow you to spread out your website budget.

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Every day that your site isn't optimized is another day your school is missing out on valuable search traffic and potential admissions prospects.

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Navigation

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Website navigation is not about the school and what you want to communicate—it's about users and what they want to learn about the school. Understanding this subtle difference will vastly improve usability.

Don't think outside of the box.

There's one golden rule to website navigation: Make it easy.

While that sounds obvious, it's also easy to miss the mark. Private school navigation is typically similar from school to school, creating a temptation to be different. Many schools with good intentions have tried thematic navigation structures with titles like Live, Learn, and Play, but (tough love time) every school I've seen go this route has converted back to a standard navigation outline soon after launching due to usability concerns.

Where did these schools err? Website navigation is not about the school and what you want to communicate—it's about users and what they want to learn about the school. Understanding this subtle difference will vastly improve usability.

In reality, having a similar navigation structure to a competitor is good. Most admissions prospects will be visiting both websites, and the familiarity they've established with the navigation will help them quickly find information on your site, which builds confidence in your school. You can then use the design and content to differentiate your school.

Remember those jaw-dropping Photos we discussed in chapter 1.

One Navigation Structure to Rule Them All

I begin every school navigation discussion with the same top-level menu items:

Other common titles for a Programs section are School Life, Student Life, and Campus Life.

Admissions is listed before About because Google prioritizes from a top-down standpoint, so this increases the chances that new visitors arriving from organic search will do so in the Admissions section (it's worth noting that the vast majority will arrive via the home page).

Academics is separated from Programs to send the message that education is the school's top priority. Depending on what's important to the school's audience, Athletics and Arts can also be top-level items. Just be careful to avoid creating a navigation structure that restricts growth. Therefore, it's good to always have a Programs section to serve as the catch-all for any future pages.

Giving is the chosen title over Supporting because usability testing has shown that the latter can be mistaken for academic or tech support. It's always good to conduct a usability test to clean out unforeseen ambiguity. Community is another title that can give website visitors pause. Does it refer to community outreach programs? Does it list facilities available to the community at large? Or is it a login area for the school's internal community?

The main navigation can be supplemented with a secondary menu typically found at the very top of the design for call-to-action links, such as Apply now, or important programs that reach a broader audience, like Summer. The key with the secondary menu is brevity—too many options can be overwhelming. I don't like to put an exact number to this because it's dependent on the design styling, but if you find that your secondary menu is too busy, it's probably a sign that something is off with the main navigation.

The sublevel navigation is where your SEO work will really come into play. Changing Residential Life to Boarding School Life to better attract search traffic is an easy switch, but will your school be willing to go with Elementary School instead of Lower School and High School over Upper School?

That's too big of a departure for many schools, but keep in mind that in Blackbaud School Website System™ and many other content management system (CMS) platforms, the navigation title dictates the page URL. Therefore, it is unlikely that your school will be able to attract "Elementary School" search traffic without having those words appear in a navigation title. This result may be acceptable for your school—the important part is to do the research and discuss the choice early so decision makers understand what is at stake and can take the necessary time to reach a conclusion.

Starting Navigation Planning Early

Like SEO, the vast majority of navigation consulting completed by Blackbaud K–12's Professional Services Team occurs during the redesign project. The navigation can be worked on at any time, and it's better to have it settled before the design process begins, so why wait?
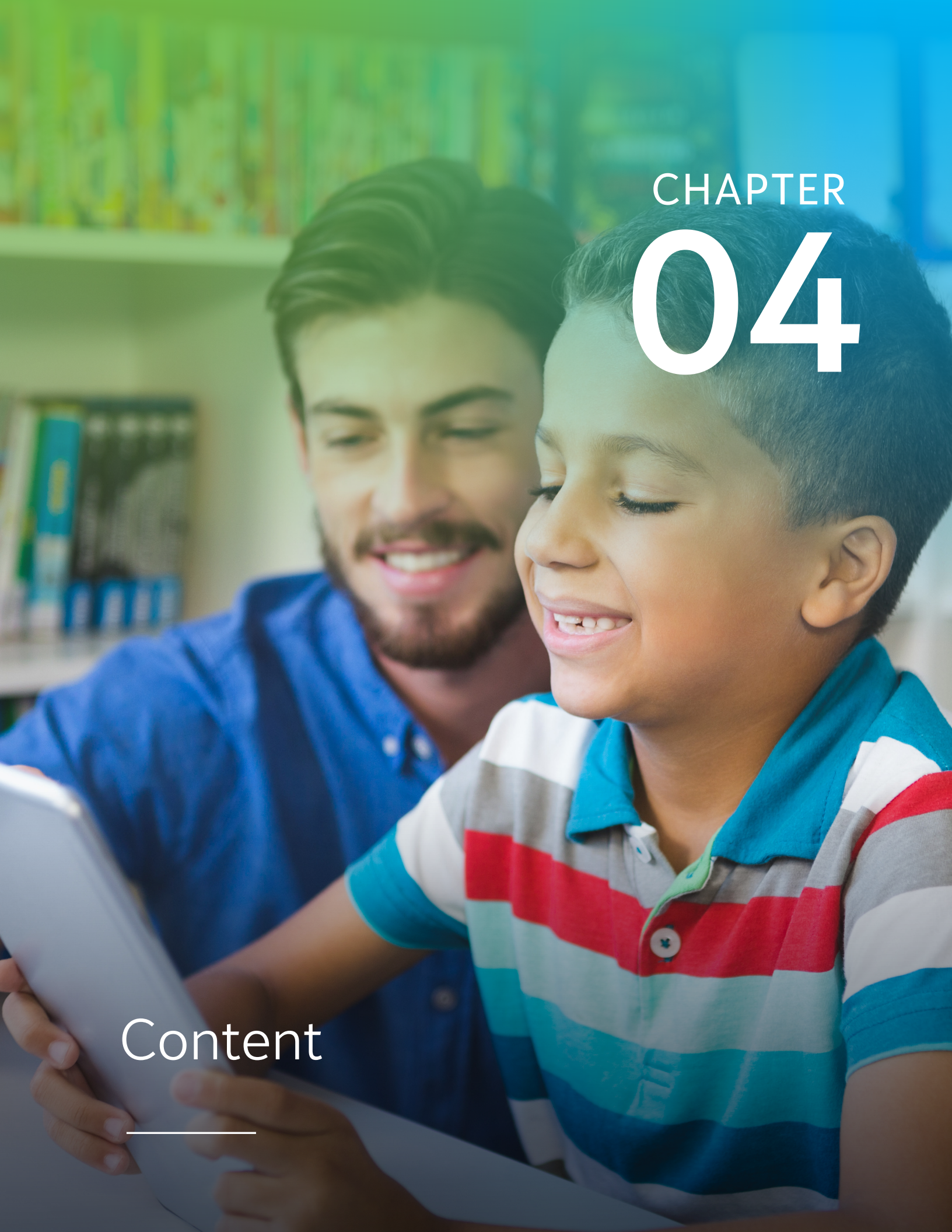
We offer a standard navigation service where a Blackbaud consultant reviews your current website and provides best practices and recommendations. This service is perfect for most schools, but for multilevel schools with complex scenarios, we also offer an in-depth navigation service that includes analytics review and usability testing. The second option takes a couple of months, making it more advantageous to complete previous to the redesign project.

If you want to go the do-it-yourself route, Optimal Workshop offers several types of user research tests with monthly subscription and pay-per-study pricing options. The tree testing tool, Treejack, is a classic usability study where you enter a navigation structure and provide scenario questions, such as "Where would you go to find the school's tuition?"

For a test audience, you can send a link to the school's constituents or pay OptimalSort to enlist participants. I typically prefer to use OptimalSort's participants because they are people who aren't familiar with the school's current website and therefore don't have any preconceived notions of where to find information.

You'll want to test at least two possible navigation structures to have a comparison. The key is to ask the same questions in each test and to have 10–15 questions total. Avoid sending people into a navigation section more than twice because the results will become more learned behavior, less gut reaction.

In the results, OptimalSort displays the success/fail rate of each question, how long it took participants to complete the tasks, and a first-click breakdown. Altogether, this data provides the necessary insight to make tough navigation decisions.

Content

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Underperforming web pages are like paddling a canoe with the anchor down—you're trying to make headway, but you're not getting anywhere.

Warning: Project delays are ahead.

Hands down, the most common reason that private school website projects get behind schedule is content creation. Even if your school has a person dedicated to writing and curating all content, the amount of people from whom they need first-draft copy or feedback for a 100-page site is mind-boggling. In turn, these faculty members are busy teaching and running the school.

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Content delays aren't unexpected—they're inevitable.

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The common workaround is to transfer the existing website copy to the new site with hopes of editing it later. This strategy keeps the project moving full steam ahead to launch, but it fails to deliver the best website for your school.

Our understanding of effective web communication has come a long way in the last decade, especially with regards to the impact of responsive design on content. For many schools, their existing copy doesn't use the latest best practices. What's more, it may be two website generations old—or older—because the content was added to the site under similar time constraints during a previous redesign project.

The solution is simple: Don't redevelop content during the design project. Take the advice of Content Marketing Strategist Emily Cretella in her eBook *Summer Sprint: Tackling That School Marketing Project Before September*, and rework content the summer before you begin. Get buy-in from your head of school and make it a school-wide initiative so all contributors know what they need to deliver and when, allowing them to plan around their vacations.

If you're about to begin a website redesign and this advice is coming too little, too late, make plans now to rework the content during the summer after the site launches so the best intentions of editing later don't become wishful thinking.

Pick a handful of priority pages to edit now and save the rest for the summer.

Cutting the Anchor

Underperforming web pages are like paddling a canoe with the anchor down—you're trying to make headway, but you're not getting anywhere. Unnecessary content and pages create clutter that makes it challenging for visitors to find the information they want. Frustration ensues, and they quickly leave the page or exit the site altogether without their question answered. Google picks up on this behavior, and it affects the site's search standings.

Before rewriting any content, conduct an audit to fully understand the pages that are paddling forward and those that are anchoring the site down. What follows is my (no longer) secret-sauce methodology for website content audits.

Step 1: Export an All Pages report for the previous 12 months from Google Analytics™ to a spreadsheet. For this exercise, delete all columns except Pageviews, Average Time on Page, Entrances, and Bounce Rate. It's also a good idea to change the primary dimension from Page to Page Title before exporting to make it easier to identify pages in the spreadsheet.

Step 2: Establish a baseline for each metric. You can approach this by calculating the average for each, or set your own performance benchmark. For example, Internet averages for time on page typically fall anywhere between 30–90 seconds. You might consider 30 seconds unacceptable, so maybe you'll set a minute as the benchmark for your site.

Step 3: Review the data in each column and highlight in red any items that fall below the established benchmark. You may also choose to highlight in green any items that perform 25 percent or better over the benchmark.

Step 4: Analyze the results and enter comments into a notes column. Pages that are red in all four categories likely need to be cut from the website. Those with red in one or two categories are probably good pages that could be improved in some way.

Reviewing the pages through the lens of these four categories helps tell the full story. For example, tuition pages often score in the red for average time on page and bounce rate—a metric that measures when people enter and exit the site on the same page without going to any other pages or performing a meaningful action, such as downloading a document. Does this mean you should delete the tuition page?

Certainly not. Tuition pages are also often in the green for pageviews and entrances. By looking at these four metrics together, we can conclude that people who have already visited the site and are in the decision-making phase of their buyer's journey are returning via search to factor the tuition cost into their decision.

Instead of deleting the page, think of ways to improve the average time on page and bounce rate. Maybe an attention-grabbing image gallery with captions highlighting strengths in the school's programs can keep people on the page longer and help justify the tuition expense. Adding links in the captions to various program pages might also get them to visit other pages, thus lowering the bounce rate.

The Tug of War

We've all heard the axiom that website "content is king," but when the average time on page is 30–90 seconds, what's so great about being the king of short attention spans?

Every website visitor comes with a purpose—a question about the school, a form that needs completing, a link to a parent resource—that is provided in the content. Thus, content is king. As school marketers, we often become too preoccupied with developing content filled with the stories and messaging we want people to learn. These competing priorities create a content tug of war that sinks engagement rates.

People will read web content, but you have to give them a reason. In this regard, you win by losing the content tug of war. Here's how:

Attract the right people.
If you skipped over the SEO chapter, go back and read it—seriously. Every web page is going to have multiple ways that people search for and associate with its topic. For example, people looking for a summer program might search for "summer camps near me," "summer camps for kids," "summer camps for youths," "summer camps for teens," "summer activities for kids," "summer arts programs"—this list could go on forever.

The key point here is to incorporate as much of the various search keyword language as possible in the text—without turning it into unreadable jargon—to attract the right audience for each page.

Make the website copy about them.
In chapter 3, we covered the importance of designing website navigation for the user's purpose. The content should be an extension of this strategy.

Review each page as if it's one big Q&A session. Ask people connected to the program or topic, as well as the school receptionists, about the questions they frequently get asked; the answers to these questions are likely what should be in the website content. You also want to develop a strategy for getting people to contact the school—if the website answers all of the questions that prospective families have, your admissions team will lose the opportunity to make personal connections with them.

Short isn't necessarily sweet.
The "nobody reads website copy anyway" movement has resulted in a slash-and-burn mentality that isn't always healthy for the website. Remember, content is king because it contains valuable answers. Deleting information purely to make a page short is—well, shortsighted. Not only does this hinder usability, but it also limits the potential for search traffic.

Don't get me wrong: I'm not saying that unnecessarily long pages are good. Each page has a primary topic, and the amount of text needed to explain it adequately may be long or short. You can make long pages appealing to visitors by:

Each page should have a minimum of 300 words.

- Removing any fluff or unnecessary info—when in doubt, cut it out

- Organizing content into an inverted pyramid structure where the essential information is at the top

- Utilizing subheads to help skimmers find the information they're after; bold and italicized text also helps

- Keeping paragraphs to three or four sentences so the text doesn't look tiresome to read

- Adding bulleted or numbered lists wherever possible to further quicken the pace

Tell the school's story.
Once the body copy has been organized to provide visitors with the information they're seeking, you can then subtly weave in the school's brand messaging. This is where the high engagement rate on videos is best used to your advantage. Other visual treatments—such as information graphics, sidebar testimonials, or Did You Know callout features—are also effective. My favorite strategy is to increase the visibility of key messaging by adding captions to images.

Keep in mind that what you're trying to communicate about the school isn't necessarily accomplished via information on the page—it's a feeling you want visitors to get that's achieved through the imagery and overall design.
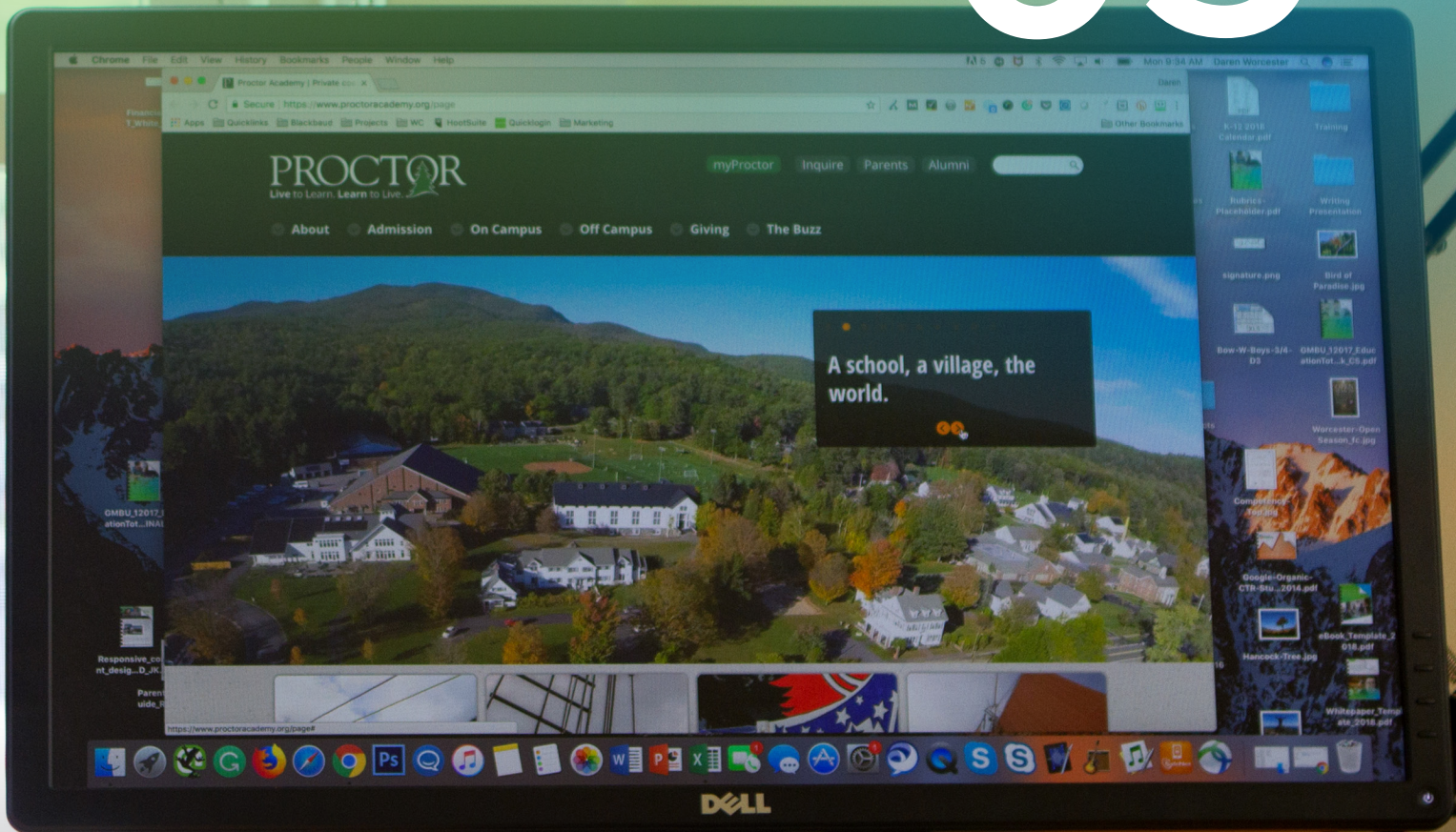
Design

The truth of the matter is that what your designer doesn't know about the CMS platform's capabilities can and will cost the school in project time, fees, and overall quality.

Choose wisely.

Design: Finally, we're to the fun part! But before you can dive into the pixel pool, there are important decisions to make regarding the website's content management system (CMS), the agency or designer who will create the website, and the scope of work—all of which has as much (if not more) impact on the final product as any design decisions.

Picking a CMS

When it comes to selecting a website CMS, there's no shortage of options. For private schools, the decision is often between choosing one of the open source platforms, such as WordPress®, Joomla®, or Drupal®, or one of the proprietary solutions created specifically for schools, such as Blackbaud School Website System.

As you might expect, there are pros and cons to each approach. This subject could be an eBook all by itself; to keep the discussion from getting too lengthy and too technical, we're going to focus on a high-level comparison between WordPress, the world's leading CMS, and Blackbaud's solution for schools.

Let's start with the most appealing benefit of WordPress: the price tag. Not only is WordPress free to use, but there are thousands of design templates available for free or a nominal fee. Because WordPress is open source, there are also thousands of developers around the world continuously creating new functionality add-ons known as plug-ins. Available for anything from image carousels to falling snowflakes (yes, that's a real plug-in), plug-ins can be free or fee-based—there's often a free version with a premium upgrade available.

While WordPress is an attractive option for small schools on a limited budget, the extendability of its open source format also means that the sky's the limit for schools with money to spend on a custom designed and programmed website.

As great as all of this sounds, there are WordPress shortcomings for schools. The biggest is data integration. Schools that choose WordPress are likely foregoing popular data-driven components on the front-end website, such as faculty directories, dynamic curriculum guides, and athletic schedules.

The sky may be the limit in capability, but the cost to custom build these features is out of reach for most school budgets.

Maintenance can also become problematic over the life span of the website. Between the WordPress platform, all of the third-party plug-ins, and any custom design styling, there are multiple code sources running the website. Whenever WordPress updates its platform (a common occurrence), it can have a domino effect on the plug-ins and design styling, creating a window where features aren't working until the downstream coding is fixed.

Herein lies a hidden expense of WordPress. The syncing of multiple code sources can leave schools in the dark regarding what went wrong when something breaks. For this reason, schools that elect to self-host need to have a WordPress developer on staff or speed dial. A school that pays to have WordPress hosted by a third-party should plan for bug fixes in its annual budget. The cost of this might not be outrageous, but the timing of issues could become problematic.

Blackbaud School Website System makes an intriguing comparison to WordPress because the pros and cons are mirror opposites. There is an up-front software cost with Blackbaud, but the CMS is designed to minimize long-term expenses over the life cycle of a school website. Being able to create multiple websites without incurring additional hosting costs, along with the capability to easily copy the design framework from one site to another (also a WordPress benefit), adds to the ROI appeal of Blackbaud's solution.

While the functionality that runs features like image carousels or expandable content blocks is typically farmed out to a third-party plug-in on a WordPress site, this code is centralized within the platform in Blackbaud School Website System. As a result, new functionality requests go through the enhancement process. However, the major benefit of centralized code is Blackbaud-maintained quality control. If something does break, you know who to call.

Blackbaud School Website System designs are established through drag-and-drop functionality widgets and cascading style sheets (CSS). The built-in functionality options and CSS-style editor ensure that it is easy for school staff to make in-house design changes without having to be programming wizards, further aiding the long-term cost of ownership. If the overall design is a concern, Blackbaud K–12's Professional Services Team has a history of using our school website system to develop award-winning, quality sites that are proven to boost admission applications and yield.

The most significant benefit of Blackbaud School Website System is also the primary drawback of WordPress—data integration. Blackbaud School Website System was developed on the same platform as our other K–12 solutions, enabling athletic schedules to seamlessly flow from Blackbaud Learning Management System™ into the school's website, and candidate information collected on the website's inquiry form to land in Blackbaud Enrollment Management System™.

With data integration comes better user authentication. In Blackbaud's education management portfolio, website managers who also need to work within Blackbaud Learning Management System can easily and securely access all products from a single login. This type of configuration in WordPress is a lot harder to set up through Lightweight Directory Access Protocol (LDAP) or single sign-on (SSO).

Selecting a Designer or Agency

Priority 1: Platform Experience

If you're wondering why so much space in the design chapter was devoted to selecting a CMS, it's because the single biggest criteria for choosing a designer should be their experience in designing to the platform. This explanation may seem self-serving, and to a degree it is, but the truth of the matter is that what your designer doesn't know about the CMS platform's capabilities can and will cost the school in project time, fees, and overall quality. Common issues include:

- **Over design**—the designer creates a design that won't work with the platform or responsive design in general. Schedule delays ensue.

- **Under design**—leary of creating a design that won't work on the platform, the designer creates a safe design. Creativity suffers.

- **Incomplete design**—this one is specific to Blackbaud's CMS. We provide a 50-page third-party design guidelines document outlining everything needed for the software's numerous school-specific features. Designers frequently review this and realize the extensiveness is more than what they estimated. They then inform the school that their quote was for [fill in the blanks here, but usually it's the home page and interior template design], and that Blackbaud K–12's Team is best suited to deliver the remaining items. The result: You're hit with unplanned design expenses.

These issues can be mitigated by having an honest discussion with the designer before contract negotiations, but this won't eliminate the risk. It's also worth noting that designers familiar with the platform can develop a creative tunnel vision. From this perspective, it's good to keep the school's in-house or go-to designer involved as a consultant.

Priority 2: Design Process

The design process matters more than you may think. The traditional method where a designer works in near isolation, sends a design over for review, and awaits feedback leaves the window too far open for schedule delays and pedantic committee critique.

Blackbaud K–12 pioneered our collaborative design process to create a better experience. By setting fixed design session dates and coordinating the designer's workload around these plans, project delays during design have become the exception instead of the rule.

More importantly, the collaborative sessions where the designer makes changes in real time based on your feedback provide a forum for the designer to educate your team on the strategy behind the design. As a result, you'll feel a pride of ownership in the finished product and walk away with a critical understanding of the design principles, which will help you manage the site going forward.

Priority 3: Design Talent

Blackbaud K–12 has many talented designers on our Professional Services Team. But you know what? So do our top competitors. Website design is an established art, and the reality is that any reputable digital agency is going to have skilled designers. This reality is why selecting the platform, a designer who knows the CMS, and the design methodology are higher-priority factors.

This explanation isn't to say you shouldn't do your due diligence. When reviewing portfolios, don't just look for designs that you like, look for diverse examples that show a range of creativity. It's also better to network with school marketing professionals at conferences and other forums to learn about their experiences than to ask agencies for references.

Selecting an individual contractor is where you have to be careful. The popularity of WordPress and the widespread availability of low-cost design templates has flooded the market with developer/designer tweeners whose portfolios consist mainly of restyled templates. If you're looking for a unique, custom design that knocks it out of the park, this is probably not the person to do it. The trouble is that you often have to look at the source code of their designs—and know what to look for—to tell the difference.

The Scope of Work

The scope of work is a signed agreement between the school and the website development agency. Once the website project begins, it's the law, and it protects both parties equally. The absolute last thing a designer wants to tell a customer is, "I'm sorry, that's out of scope," but this conversation occurs too frequently. I can't stress enough how critical it is for the school to carefully review the scope and ask questions—lots of questions—prior to signing.

The more detailed the scope is, the better. Any ambiguity has the potential to become a bone of contention that could derail the project's schedule and budget. When reviewing the scope, pay attention to:

Red flag!

- Whether the work is charged hourly or a flat fee for the agreed-upon services

- The level of creative services—for example, template or custom design

- The number of design concepts and revisions for the home page and interior designs

- The allotment of landing pages or specialty pages, such as calendars or athletic team pages

- Specific design and functionality features, such as any limit on image or content carousels, the ability to have a content-rich mega menu, the incorporation of video, and the inclusion of unique design requests in the scope

- The number of pages to be built by the agency or designer

Blackbaud K–12's scopes of work differ from traditional expectations due to our collaborative design methodology. Instead of providing a set number of initial concepts and revisions, we offer a quantity of design sessions. It may look like you're getting less at first glance, but you're likely to see far more design possibilities through the collaborative sessions than you would by playing the back-and-forth revision game.

Budget is typically the driving force behind the scope of work decisions, but I encourage you to also look further down the road at longevity and flexibility. You could spend a hefty sum creating a custom designed home page around a hot design trend, but what happens when the fad fades in two years? Are you locked in? Will you have the budget to redo the home page so soon? If not, will the home page become an admissions liability?

To put this in context, consider the rapid rise and fall of the auto-playing, full-browser video. Visually, the technique is stunning, and many schools were quick to incorporate it into their home pages. Then a funny thing happened. As explained in the Blackbaud K–12 blog, Google's search algorithm became heavily weighted for mobile devices, and the bandwidth required to play these videos significantly affected search results. Even Wistia®, a video hosting company, has advocated against using these videos on home pages.

If the design coding and the CMS platform provides schools with full managerial control over the design, your problem is solved! The only way to know whether you'll have this ability is to ask up front. In chapter 1, we discussed preparing a list of designs that you like. You can then dissect these examples into a wish list of specific design features to drive the scope of work, but also to provide a blueprint for what you'll need to manage.

"Yes, you can manage that," is not an answer you should accept at face value from a sales representative. When possible, ask to see how, because the back-end content management can vary greatly due to the CMS platform and the design coding.

Planning for School Website Design Season

The average custom website design project for schools takes six months to complete. If you're going to stick with your existing CMS and design agency, add a month for sales discussions; if you're going to evaluate new vendors and platforms, add three months. Also, plan for a month between signing the sales agreement and the project kickoff.

Then you must factor in seasonality. Because Blackbaud K–12's Professional Services Team works exclusively with schools, it is busiest in the spring and summer months when schools want to ramp-up for a back-to-school launch.

This timeline means that a school looking to begin the process in March or April is going to be under pressure. Sure, there are ways to get it done, but a designer that is working nights and weekends to squeeze in your project isn't going to be at maximum creativity.

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This isn't an eBook on how to create a good enough website. No—we're discussing how to create the best site for your school, the type that floods admissions with applications, and for that, you need time.

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The ideal timeline is to complete the sales process in July through October and begin the redesign project in August through January. This time frame will enable you to complete the project by June, providing plenty of time to make any final content edits and soft launch over the summer. Schools that have heeded the advice in this eBook and completed image collection, SEO, navigation, and content creation in advance can shorten their project timeline by a month or two.

Sales	**Project Kickoff**	**Site Review**	**Launch**
July–October	August–January	March–May	June–August

The One Unforgivable Mistake

The design process is fun. Enjoy the ride. Website design is also subjective, so it's hard to draw a line between good and bad decisions. Even the argument against home page video isn't as cut and dry as I've made it seem. Yes, auto-playing, full-browser videos will cause your home page to fall in search results, and fewer admissions prospects will see it as a result. However, what if those prospects that do see it convert into applicants at a higher rate because of the video? Could the pros ultimately outweigh the cons? It's possible.

Subjectivity aside, there's one undeniable, unforgivable mistake you can make in the design process, and it's a common problem: being too nice. Yes, you read that correctly, but before you interpret it to mean that I've given you a license to rudeness, please allow me to explain.

You're going to spend a lot of time interacting with the designer throughout the website development process. As you get to know the designer personally, it's only natural that you may want to spare his or her feelings if there's something you don't like about the design. Not being forthcoming is unforgivable because the design will proceed in an unwanted direction, and this work can't be recouped later.

It's important to understand that website designs are front-loaded—the designer spends the bulk of time developing the initial concept. Think of it as the foundation of a house. If you get to the end of the project and there's an issue with the foundation, the whole thing has to come down. In all likelihood, this rework is going to require additional service fees and a new production schedule.

Therefore, honest design feedback is the best policy. It's also highly unlikely that a constructive critique is going to offend. Professional website designers have thick skin—if they don't, they won't last long in this business. They also share the same goal as you, to create the best design for the school within the allotted scope. Why wouldn't they want to hear your complete feedback?

Another common scenario you may find yourself in: Something with the design isn't quite right, but you aren't sure how to describe it. A good exercise in this situation is to write out all of the things you like about the design. An experienced designer will be able to use this list to diagnose the issue. You may be surprised to find that a relatively simple change, such as the background color, can significantly alter your overall impression.

Site Review

Website projects can feel like marathons. After completing content and design, the finish line is finally in sight—but there's still plenty of work to be done to ensure a smooth launch.

We've reached the final countdown.

Website projects can feel like marathons. After completing content and design, the finish line is finally in sight—but there's still plenty of work to be done to ensure a smooth launch. Start by assembling a site review team with members from each department represented on the website, as well as someone from IT to coordinate the technical launch aspects. The first order of business is to establish a plan for each of the tasks leading to launch.

Scheduling a Launch Date

Involve all site review committee members in the launch date selection to ensure that it doesn't complicate important events, such as the deadline for enrollment contracts or a major fundraising push. Once a date is selected, you can work backwards on a site review schedule with the team, turning buy-in on the launch date into an agreement for everyone to meet their site review deliverable deadlines.

When selecting a date and time, avoid Fridays, and plan to launch in the morning when website traffic is low and there's plenty of time to work through any issues with your website vendor and Domain Name System (DNS) host. And don't forget to notify your website vendor and DNS host of the planned launch date as soon as possible, so they can plan accordingly.

It's also best to plan a soft launch where the new site goes live without any fanfare. By deferring launch announcements and celebrations until after the site is live, you retain the flexibility to reschedule if necessary.

Lowering the DNS TTL

A quick explanation on these acronyms: DNS stands for Domain Name System. It's like a phone book for the web that connects a website's URL to the site's actual number address (IP address). The TTL setting, or Time to Live, controls the length of time it takes for DNS changes to appear. For example, if the TTL is set to two hours, and the DNS change is made at 8:00 a.m., the new website won't display for everyone trying to access the school's URL until 10:00 a.m.

For the most consistent user experience and to limit the possibility of downtime during the DNS propagation period, it's best to have the TTL set to the lowest possible time a week before the launch (and then returned to the original setting after the launch). You should also know that DNS service providers vary in what they allow for a minimum time setting—some restrict the TTL from being less than an hour or two.

To help streamline this process, Blackbaud K–12 offers free DNS hosting with a minimum TTL of five minutes for our schools. If your school doesn't utilize our DNS hosting service, we will provide instructions on how to configure the DNS settings to launch the new website.

If the school maintains a separate DNS record for its internal network, ensure that this is also updated.

Obtaining an SSL Certificate

SSL stands for Secure Sockets Layer, and it's what makes websites secure by encrypting all data transmitted between the web server and the user's browser. A requirement for form pages that collect credit card and other sensitive information, it's also good to have the school's entire site encrypted because Google favors secure sites in search results.

Blackbaud K–12 procures and installs SSL certificates for the websites we host, which is one of the reasons we need advance notice of website launches. If you're hosting the website with another vendor, make sure to get an SSL certificate configured before the launch.

Creating Your Website Review and Editorial Team

Ideally, all members of the site review committee are made responsible for reviewing their section of the website and submitting issues. To control the chaos, create a spreadsheet where you can consolidate and organize feedback before providing it to your website vendor; organize the spreadsheet by issue title, description, URL, and the browser and operating system where the problem occurred.

In all likelihood, many of the issues reported by the committee aren't going to be design or programming issues at all—they're content edits. The purpose of having a website CMS is to efficiently handle these updates in-house, which raises another key question: Who should get training and editorial access to the site?

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While it's tempting to build an editorial army to ease the burden on the communications office, a large group may create more content quality issues than they solve.

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Restricting access initially and then expanding editorial rights as the school becomes more comfortable with the website CMS is also less likely to ruffle feathers than revoking previously granted access.

That said, you don't want to create a post-launch situation where your inbox gets flooded with website update requests—#redesignfail. Site review is an ideal time to create an online form to collect website requests and establish submission guidelines.

Testing the Website like a Quality Assurance Pro

Blackbaud K–12 completes extensive website testing before submitting the site for review, but this doesn't mean you shouldn't also do your due diligence. Website issues are often the result of unique criteria—dormant one day, active the next—and the more people you have searching for these bugs, the better. Follow these tips to test the website like a quality assurance pro:

- Review each page in the popular browsers and devices; use web compatibility testing software, such as BrowserStack, Sauce Labs®, or SmartBear®,to streamline the process.

- Test content displays by entering extremely long headlines, populating all possible display fields, and adding multiple photos and other supported content items.

- Carefully review content to make sure all dates and important figures, such as tuition costs, are correct.

- Check the pages with Google's Mobile-Friendly Test tool. Even if the website is mobile accessible as a whole, it's possible for individual pages to fail as the result of self-managed content, such as third-party embed codes or fixed-width tables.

- Use a tool like the Pingdom® Website Speed Test to ensure proper page performance; ideally, the home page should be between two to four megabytes and load in under two seconds. Excessively large pages, which can hinder search results, are often caused by too many images, overly large video files, or users uploading raw photos that weren't cropped to the display size and saved for web optimization.

- Make all links within the content relative. For example, instead of entering a full testing site URL—such as https://testingsitedomain.org/admissions/tuition—into the link editor, only add the part that follows the main domain, beginning with the forward slash—/admissions/tuition—as this will ensure that the link works correctly on both the testing and live URLs.

Creating a Redirect Map

When the new website launches, many page URLs will change, and some pages will no longer exist. Redirects catch people trying to access the old pages through bookmarks, browser autofill, or search engines and send them to the new site instead of a broken page. More importantly, inbound links to the old URLs from other websites transfer SEO value, which is one of the most important factors in search results. By catching these broken links in a redirect, the value that would otherwise get lost is transferred to the new site.

A redirect map is a simple spreadsheet where the old URL is listed in column A and the corresponding replacement page URL is added on the same row in column B. Save yourself some time by using a tool, such as Screaming Frog, to crawl the current site and export a spreadsheet of page URLs. You can then delete pages where the URL won't change and manually add the new URLs into column B.

Ask during the sales process so this doesn't become an unwelcome surprise at the end of the project.

Make sure to ask your website vendor how they handle redirects. Blackbaud School Website System, allows you to manually add, edit, and delete redirects within the software, but the Blackbaud Data Services Team can also directly upload your redirect map to save this work.

Adding the Analytics Tracking Code

Whether your school uses Google Analytics or another solution for monitoring website traffic, it's best to implement the tracking code before the launch day to ensure that it isn't forgotten. You'll want to use the code from the school's current analytics account to perform year-over-year data comparisons between the old and new site. Blackbaud School Website System has a field in the site settings where you can add the tracking code.

If you have other digital marketing tracking codes, talk to your website vendor about the best way to implement these, as the answer can vary depending on the CMS platform.

Launch

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You deserve a pat on the back because the final result is the best website possible for your school. Enjoy the kudos that will be coming your way—you've earned them!

Play the waiting game.

In the days leading up to the launch, you've confirmed the date and time with your website and DNS hosting companies. You've also double- and triple-checked the site review list to ensure that the SSL certificate, redirects, and the analytics tracking code are all completed. Now, after months and possibly years of preparation, you're left with nothing to do at the launch (for the moment, anyway), impatiently waiting for the DNS changes to propagate to the new site.

Take a deep breath. Remove your hands from the keyboard. Trust that the TTL was set properly—it was lowered, right? And stop clicking refresh on your browser. Take a moment to check email, get a refreshment, or even relax for a minute—once the website launches, it's right back to work.

The Post-Launch To-Do List

The following items are all things that Blackbaud K–12's Professional Services Team completes on behalf of the school for all website launches that we handle. It's good for you to know what's happening behind the scenes so you can double-check our work, or—in the case where you're using a different website vendor—you may need to complete these items yourself.

Perform a website click-through.
Take one last tour of the website, visiting every page in search of issues. The first thing to check is the SSL security. You'll know the site is secure when the URL begins with https instead of http. Also, go to the giving form page to ensure that there are no browser warnings about accessing nonsecure content.

The other main thing to look out for is broken or incorrect links. Broken links are easy to spot, but links that are pointing to the old testing URL are tricky because the page will appear correct—you have to look in the browser toolbar at the URL to see that you've inadvertently linked to the testing site. This is an issue because Google will follow these links and catalog the testing site, creating duplicate content issues for SEO. If you took the time in site review to fix these links, this review should be a quick run through.

Access Google Search Console.
By gaining access to Google Search Console, you can add a sitemap, request that Google recrawl the website to speed up the process of cataloging the new URLs, and monitor various search traffic analytics and reports. When requesting access to the site's account, Google has several verification options. Ask your website vendor about the best method for the site.

Once you have gained access, go to Crawl > Sitemaps to submit an Extensible Markup Language (XML) sitemap. Your website vendor should be able to provide this link.

Then go to Crawl > Fetch as Google to request a fetch of the home page, after which you'll see a link to submit the page for indexing (select the option to also crawl the page's direct links).

Confirm analytics tracking.

An hour or two after the launch, log in to your analytics platform to ensure that website traffic is getting tracked. The easiest way to do this is to go to the Behavior > All Pages report and look for URLs associated with the new site.

Celebrate!

Congratulations, you've properly prepared for the website redesign project, completed SEO optimization, reworked the navigation for ease of use, updated content to attract and retain attention, helped create a design that makes an immediate and lasting impression, and painstakingly led the project through the site review and launch phases. You deserve a pat on the back because the final result is the best website possible for your school. Enjoy the kudos that will be coming your way—you've earned them!

About the Author

After serving as an advertising copywriter for three years, Daren Worcester joined WhippleHill Communications in 2002 to write private school website copy. As the company grew, he became a jack-of-all website trades, leading hundreds of schools through the development process as a project manager, navigation and SEO consultant, and CMS software implementation trainer—usually wearing all hats at once.

As WhippleHill's director of consulting services prior to the Blackbaud acquisition, he managed a 20-person website development and software implementation team, during which time he conceptualized and led the creation of the collaborative design process utilized by Blackbaud K–12's Professional Services Team today. A frequent presenter at private school conferences, Daren also developed Blackbaud K–12's navigation consultation, Google Analytics workshop, and SEO optimization and training services. Currently serving as Blackbaud K–12's senior content marketing manager, he continues to help schools by promoting thought leadership content.

Outside of the private school world, Daren volunteers in community youth programs as a coach and Cub Scouts® Den Leader. He is the author of *Open Season: True Stories of the Maine Warden Service,* published by Down East Books, and he has been featured in *Backpacker®* and *Down East™* magazines.

About Blackbaud

Blackbaud (NASDAQ: BLKB) is the world's leading cloud software company powering social good. Serving the entire social good community—nonprofits, foundations, companies, education institutions, healthcare organizations and individual change agents—Blackbaud connects and empowers organizations to increase their impact through cloud software, services, expertise, and data intelligence. The Blackbaud portfolio is tailored to the unique needs of vertical markets, with solutions for fundraising and relationship management, marketing and engagement, financial management, grant and award management, organizational and program management, social responsibility, payment services and analytics. Serving the industry for more than three decades, Blackbaud is headquartered in Charleston, South Carolina and has operations in the United States, Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom. For more information, visit www.blackbaud.com.